

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

**The President's News Conference With President Nicolas Sarkozy of France
in Caen, France**

June 6, 2009

President Sarkozy. Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon to all of you. Welcome. I would like to say to the President of the United States of America how proud France is to welcome him for the second time this year.

This afternoon we will be talking about the ceremonies and the commemoration of the D-Day landings, but I want to say in the strongest, most sincere terms that never in the history, perhaps, of our two countries, the United States and France have been so close to one another on major issues, major questions.

I said to the President that we are determined to help him in his decision to close down—shut down Guantanamo. I told President Barack Obama to what extent we support his open, outstretched hand initiative to Russia. We approve and endorse this policy.

I said to the President that we totally agreed with him on the Israeli and Palestinian issue: two states that need to live alongside one another, an Israeli state, whose security we're very attached to, and a secure Palestinian state, and to what extent we support American diplomacy when it requested that an end, a stop, and a halt be put to settlements.

On the Iranian matter, I've said this in very frank and open terms to the Iranian Foreign Secretary, how important it is that he take the hand outstretched by President Obama, that we—we, France, Europe, and United States—are totally aligned on this, and we cannot in any way accept the insane statements made by President Ahmadi-nejad.

On North Korea, we have total convergence of views with the American President. And of course, France is delighted to have fully reintegrated NATO, as I said to the American President.

So really it is a pleasure to work with Barack Obama. We work regularly together. He knows that France is a friend of the United States. We basically coordinate on all major issues, and we are determined to continue that.

Barack, welcome. Welcome to your family.

President Obama. Well, it's wonderful to be back in France, particularly on this day, because this day marks not only the triumph of freedom, but it also marks how the transatlantic alliance has allowed for extraordinary prosperity and security on both sides of the Atlantic. The fact that France fully reintegrated into NATO this year, under President Sarkozy's leadership, is just one further indication of the degree to which U.S.-French cooperation can help to underpin not only security in Europe but also a more secure and prosperous world beyond Europe.

I've very much appreciated President Sarkozy's leadership on a whole range of issues. He mentioned a number of them: France's leadership within Europe in understanding the need for us to have tough diplomacy with the Iranians, to reach out to them, but also insist that we can't afford a nuclear arms race in the Middle East; our close collaboration on a whole host of issues with Russia; France's willingness to accept a Guantanamo detainee, but more broadly, to help us as we want to deal with the terrorist threat, but do so in a way that is consistent with

our values and our ideals; the assistance that all NATO allies, as well as others, are providing in helping to bring about a more peaceful and democratic Afghanistan.

On all of these issues, President Sarkozy has not just cooperated, he's led. And that kind of approach, I think, is serving the interests of France, but it's also serving the interests of the world. And we're very grateful for that.

Obviously, I also want to make mention of the extraordinary tragedy of the Air France plane that we believe may have gone down. We don't know yet what exactly happened, but it is heartbreaking, obviously, for the families, who the American people offer thoughts and prayers. We have already authorized all of our resources to coordinate with the French in trying to discover where the plane went down and to find as much information as possible. But our deepest condolences to the people of France, most particularly to the families involved. And we are determined to find out what happened and support France in that regard.

So with that, I think that we can take a question.

Middle East Peace Process/Iran

Q. Mr. President, concerning——

Interpreter. Excuse me, the journalist is speaking without a microphone.

President Obama. I'm sorry. Apparently, you're speaking without a microphone, so the translator cannot hear you. Do we have a mike anywhere? Now he's got the microphone.

Q. Yes, right here, Mr. President. Sorry. You said yesterday that you hoped to see significant progress in the Middle East by the end of this year. What did you mean by that?

And, President Sarkozy, you had a meeting earlier this week with the Iranian Foreign Minister. What message was he able to give you to pass on to the President? Thank you.

President Obama. Okay. I think all of us understand what would constitute progress when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Progress would mean that the parties involved, supported by not just the United States, not just by France, but also other Arab States, are in serious, constructive negotiations about how to achieve a two-state solution.

I don't expect that a 60-year problem is solved overnight, but as I said before, I do expect both sides to recognize that their fates are tied together, and that it is in the interests of Israel, its security interests, as well as the interests of the Palestinians to resolve this in a peaceful way.

Now, there are a whole host of difficult questions out there. We all know what those questions are. But I believe President Sarkozy and I agree that we have to move beyond the current stalemate. Both sides are going to have obligations. I've discussed the importance of a cessation of settlement construction, but I also want to reemphasize, because that's gotten more attention than what I've also said, which is the Palestinians have to renounce violence, end incitement, improve their governance capacity so that Israelis can be confident that the Palestinians can follow through on any commitments they make across the table.

Now, I cannot impose such negotiations or, certainly, the terms of a final settlement on the parties. That's their task. President Sarkozy cannot impose peace in that region. But what we can do is to be friends to Israel, honest in our assessments of what it's going to take, hold the Palestinians accountable for their end of the bargain, and move the process forward. And we are going to try to put as much energy as we can into it. My special envoy, George Mitchell,

is going to be returning to the region this week, and we are going to systematically work through as many of these issues as possible.

One last point I want to emphasize: The Arab States have to be a part of this process. It's not sufficient just to point at the Palestinian problem and then say we are not going to engage, we're not going to take responsibility. They are going to have to step up as well because the Arab States not only are important politically, they're also important economically. And to the extent that they put their shoulder behind the wheel, that can move the process forward in a significant way.

President Sarkozy. It is not for me to speak for the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Iran. I can tell you what I told him. I said to him, number one, that he had to take the hand stretched out by Barack Obama and set a meeting so that the group of six, the six-party talks start again; secondly, that we all were aligned if Iran wants access to civilian nuclear energy; it is entitled to that, but if it wants nuclear—military nuclear, the answer is no. And you have to understand this fair and square.

I said, if your interests are peaceful, then accept controls. We cannot accept the Iranian leader to make extremely aggressive statements on the one hand, and IAEA checks and controls not to go—be accepted by the Iranians and, at the same time, to give them access to civilian nuclear energy.

Again, France and the United States are working hand in glove on this one. Iran is a great nation, a great civilization. We want peace, we want dialog, and we want to help them develop. But we do not want nuclear—military nuclear weapons to spread, and we are clear on that.

European-U.S. Relations

Q. Mr. President, there were a lot of comments in France and Germany recently on the fact that you stayed only briefly in these two countries, and that you haven't spent much private time aside—outside of the official engagements here. Does that mean that Europe is not a priority—on your priority list or diplomatic list? Or what would you have to say on the subject?

President Obama. What it means is that I have a very tough schedule. I would love nothing more than to have a leisurely week in Paris, stroll down the Seine, take my wife out to a nice meal, have a picnic in Luxembourg Gardens. [*Laughter*] Those days are over, for the moment.

And so I think it's very important to understand that good friends don't worry about the symbols and the conventions and the protocols. The United States is a critical friend and ally of France, and vice versa. I personally consider Nicolas Sarkozy a friend; I think he feels the same way. And so since I know I can always pick up the phone and talk to him, that it's not necessary for me to spend huge amounts of time other than just getting business done when I'm here.

At some point I will be the ex-President, and then you will find me in France, I'm sure, quite a bit, having fun. I said the same thing in Germany yesterday, where they were asking, "Well, you know, you didn't have an overnight here, or this"—I think you guys are reading too much into my schedule.

My main issue has to do with the fact that when I take these foreign trips, it's to get business done, because I also have an economy where the unemployment rate is 9.4 percent. We still have to pass financial regulations that will prevent the kind of crisis that we've seen from happening again. That all requires a lot of work, and so my travel schedule is always limited.

President Sarkozy. Well, in a democracy, one has to accept all criticism and all comments. And let me tell you very sincerely, do you think that we don't have enough on our plate to do without spending time to have our pictures taken, what with the unemployment rate in France, the United States, the Western world, what with the Iranian issues? Do you think our prime concern is what glossy magazine we'll be pictured in, or what restaurant we're going to go and spend an evening in, or whether we spend an extra night here or not?

Well, what does friendship mean? Friendship means that when the United States say we're going to shut down Guantanamo, we say, well, we'll help you; we'll have some of the detainees in France. Friendship is what? It's coming back into NATO and taking two important command posts in the integrated structure. That is what friendship is all about. We're here to work together to achieve results. We're not here, watch in hand, saying, "How much time did you spend with so-and-so?" I understand that you should put the question, but frankly, do you think people are just waiting to see us hand in hand sitting here looking into one another's eyes? Of course not.

They want us to achieve results on Iran, on North Korea, on whatever it is, but where we're in total harmony. See, I'll tell you one thing: It's very easy to work with the United States of American President.

President Obama. It's also because President Sarkozy speaks quite quickly, so we can get even more done. [Laughter]

President Sarkozy. I speak fast, but you understand fast.

President Obama. We'll take one last question. We've got a mike over here?

Religious Freedom Around the World/Turkey

Q. Arnaud Leparmentier, *Le Monde*. President Obama, the ban on headscarves and veils for young girls in French schools and the President Sarkozy's position on Turkey's entry into the European Union, is this likely to hinder the new approach to Islam that you presented in Cairo two days ago?

President Obama. Well, I think that this is a process. And what I tried to do in Cairo was to open up a conversation both in the Muslim communities, but also in non-Muslim communities, both in the Middle East, but also here in the West.

And as I said in the speech, I think that freedom of religious expression is critical. That is part of our liberal tradition both in France and the United States, and that we should not have two standards for freedom of religious expression, one for Muslims and one for non-Muslims.

That doesn't mean that each country isn't going to be working through these issues with its own history and its own sensitivities in mind. And I don't take responsibility for how other countries are going to approach this. I will tell you that in the United States, our basic attitude is, is that we're not going to tell people what to wear. If, in their exercise of religion, they are impeding somebody else's rights, that's something that we would, obviously, be concerned about.

But my general view is, is that the most effective way to integrate people of all faiths is to not try to suppress their customs or traditions, rather to open up opportunities and give them a chance for full participation in the life of their country.

With respect to Turkey, President Sarkozy and I have discussed this before. I am not a member of the EU—the United States is not a member of the EU, and so we can't dictate the

terms in which any country enters into the EU. I do think that Turkey is a enormously important ally in NATO. They're helping us in Afghanistan, in that critical effort. They have a growing economy. They are interested in further integration with Europe, and I would encourage that. So I've said publicly that I think Turkish membership in the EU would be important.

Now, President Sarkozy, as an actual member of the EU, has a different view. But I think it's very important to note that he strongly supports the work that Turkey is doing in NATO. I believe that he's interested in further economic integration. And what the United States wants to do is just to continue to encourage discussions and talks and a process whereby Turkey can feel confident that it has a friendship with France, with the United States, with all of Europe, and that it—to the extent that it's defining itself as part of Europe, that it has an opportunity to be a part. But, again, that's something that's going to have to move forward not based on what the United States says, but rather a dialog between the European Union members and Turkey.

In all of this, I think Europe and France has a critical role to play, just as the United States does, in sending a message to Muslims around the world that we welcome and want their participation in a world community that is peaceful, that is prosperous, that is economically integrated, that is developing on behalf of all people and not just some people.

And in both France and in the United States, we have enormous Muslim populations. So as I said in the Cairo speech, there's no contradiction between America and Islam because we have Muslim Americans who actually have higher education and income averages than is the average in the United States. That's a testament to the degree to which they've been able to succeed, thrive, remain true to their religion, and be full-fledged, patriotic Americans. And that kind of approach, I think, is the one that we want, as opposed to an approach that increases tensions both within our borders and outside of our borders.

Q. Does the U.S. press have equal time, because they've had two.

President Obama. That was a very self-serving—[laughter]. I'm teasing. Go ahead.

President Sarkozy. Perhaps I could just say a few words on this. First of all, I thought that President Obama's speech was a remarkable speech. And we have long been awaiting to hear the United States of America, the world's number-one power, shouldering its full share of responsibility in avoiding the clash of cultures and civilizations between East and West. And I totally agree with what President Obama said, including on headscarves and veils.

But let me simply say two things. In France, any young girl, any girl who wishes to wear a veil or a headscarf may do so; it's her free choice to do so. We simply set two limits because we are a secular state. That is that the—that civil servants who are actually on duty must not have—must not show any sign of their religious belief, be they Jewish, Orthodox, Muslim, Protestant, Catholic, you name it. That's what we call a totally impartial, secular administration. In other words, when on duty at the actual counters where they work, there must be no visible sign of whatever religion they belong to. Secondly, the fact that young girls may choose to wear a veil or a headscarf is not a problem for as long as they have actually chosen to do so, as opposed to this being imposed upon them, be it by their families or by their environment.

In a country like France, where everyone can live according to their convictions and beliefs, we respect the individual, we respect women, we respect the family. I've also done a lot when I was home secretary, Minister of the Interior, to ensure that the Muslim community in France could practice their religion and their creed like any other—any other religion or creed in France.

Now, you belong to a newspaper I have a lot of respect for, which called for its readers to vote in the Presidential election for my adversary and not for me. And what would you say to justify this? You said, "Well, be careful, President Sarkozy is going to align us too much on the United States of America." And 2 years later, what are you telling me? You're telling me, "There's one subject on which President Obama and President Sarkozy don't agree." That should reassure you, Mr. Leparmentier. You should be happy about that now.

Of course, we agree, we concur on the ultimate objective. What is President Obama's objective? What is mine, ultimately? It is that Turkey may play its full part, its essential role as a bridge between East and West. That is an essential role. Where there is a difference, it's how to go about doing this. The traditional position of the United States of America is the integration of Turkey. This was President Bush's position, President Clinton's position, the position of all United States Presidents. Mine you are familiar with: It is not integration into the European Union, not accession into the European Union. But I did suggest that we Europeans, together with the Russians and together with the Turks, does think about having a common economic and security area. We have no divergence as to objective, the objective we're seeking to achieve, simply the way of going about it.

Turkey—the objective is Turkey play its role as a bridge between East and West. I said to President Obama, I think it's important that Europe has borders, have frontiers, because that is a stabilizing factor. And I cannot allow that stabilizing factor in the world to be undermined. That doesn't mean that we have to push back Turkey into the darkness. Turkey is a strong ally. Turkey is a bridge between different worlds. The only issue is how to go about achieving that. That's what we talked about.

So let us have at least one point on which we are totally—not totally in agreement, and that will give us time to think about future elections.

Iran/North Korea

Q. My question is for both Presidents, please. On Iran and North Korea, what has the current policy, which is largely the same as the ones of recent years, produced other than giving time to North Korea and Iran to advance their nuclear ambitions? Thank you.

President Obama. Well, I think it's important to distinguish between the two countries and what they've been doing of late.

North Korea's actions over the last several months have been extraordinarily provocative, and they have made no bones about the fact that they are testing nuclear weapons, testing missiles that potentially would have intercontinental capacity. And, in fact, we are not intending to continue a policy of rewarding provocation. The parties that are involved in the six-party talks we have contacted; they issued very clear statements and are now in the process of working on a very clear resolution condemning North Korea's actions. You haven't seen China and Russia respond as forcefully in the past on these issues, because I think there's an indication that they recognize how destabilizing North Korea's actions have been.

My preference is always to use a diplomatic approach. But diplomacy has to involve the other side engaging in a serious way in trying to solve problems. And we have not seen that kind of reaction from North Korea. So we will continue to consult with our allies. We'll continue to consult with all the parties who previously have been involved in the six-party talks. But we are going to take a very hard look at how we move forward on these issues, and I don't think that there should be an assumption that we will simply continue down a path in which

North Korea is constantly destabilizing the region, and we can just react in the same ways by, after they've done these things for a while, then we reward them.

Now, with respect to Iran, I've made very clear that we are not taking the same position. I mean, I'm curious that you would suggest that we're taking the same approach when I'm spending an awful lot of time back home answering people who are concerned that what we're doing is too radical. I mean, we are breaking significantly from past approaches, and we are saying we are willing to have direct negotiations with the Iranians on a whole range of issues without preconditions, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and resolve.

Like President Sarkozy, my view is that Iran's possession of a nuclear weapon would be profoundly dangerous, not just to the United States, not just to Israel, but to the entire region and, over time, the entire world. Because there's no possibility that Iran gets a nuclear weapon in which you don't see a whole host of countries in the Middle East decide, "We've got to go for it as well."

This is part of the reason, by the way, when it comes to North Korea and Iran, that I've said it's not sufficient for the United States or France or other members of the nuclear club simply to say, "All of you have to stop, but we're not going to do anything to change ourselves."

I gave a speech in Prague in which I said all of us have responsibilities; that I am going to be traveling to Moscow for a summit to restart significant arms—nuclear arms reduction negotiations with the Russians; that I want to reinvigorate our nonproliferation treaty. I think we should create a stable consensus in which countries who want peaceful—or nuclear power for peaceful civilian use are able to do so, and that our goal collectively is to eliminate proliferation, lock down loose nuclear materials that are out there, negotiate a whole series of treaties that lower the temperature, and ultimately, make nuclear weapons obsolete.

Now, that's not going to happen in my time, my lifetime; it won't happen in President Sarkozy's lifetime. But if we start moving on that pathway and other countries can look and say, "The United States is not just talking the talk, but it's walking the walk," then I think that will indicate to the Iranians, for example, that the goal here is not to single them out per se; it's to suggest that this is dangerous for everybody, including them. Their security interests will not be served by possession of a nuclear weapon.

The last point I'd make on Iran, the Supreme Leader has said, "We don't want nuclear weapons; that's not what we're pursuing." I'm happy to hope that that's true, but in international relations, I can't just base things on hope, especially when you see actions to the contrary.

My—one of my famous predecessors, Ronald Reagan, I think, said it pretty well when he said, "Trust, but verify." And we're not even to the point yet where we're having those conversations with the Iranians. But ultimately, if in fact Iran does not seek nuclear weapons, then it shouldn't be that hard for us to have a series of negotiations in which the international community feels that confidence and in which Iran then is able to enjoy a whole host of economic and political benefits and gains much greater legitimacy in all of its other endeavors.

President Sarkozy. Okay. *Merci.* Thank you.

Q. [Inaudible]

President Obama. You already got a whole interview. Thank you, everybody.

Note: The President's news conference began at 1:06 p.m. at the Prefecture. In his remarks, the President referred to former Guantanamo detainee Lakhdar Boumediene, who was released into French custody in May 2009; George J. Mitchell, U.S. Special Envoy for Middle East Peace; and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Hoseini-Khamenei of Iran. President Sarkozy referred to Minister of Foreign Affairs Manuchehr Motaki of Iran. President Sarkozy and some reporters spoke in French, and their remarks were translated by an interpreter.

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